



**FINAL REPORT
OF THE
BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION
ON YOUTH SAFETY
AND JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM**

Submitted on November 6, 2001

Anthony A. Williams
Mayor, District of Columbia

The Honorable Eugene N. Hamilton
Senior Judge and Chair
Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth
Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform



**Respectfully Submitted by Members of the
Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and
Juvenile Justice Reform**

Linda Bowen
Executive Director
National Funding Collaborative on Violence
Prevention

Walter Broadnax, Ph.D.
Dean, School of Public Affairs
American University

Timothy C. Coughlin
President
Riggs National Corporation

Father Russell E. Dillard
Saint Augustine Church

Alex Escarrega
Juvenile Service Administrator
Department of Justice

Terri Lee Freeman
President
Community Foundation for the National Capital
Region

The Honorable Eugene N. Hamilton, Chair
Senior Judge
Superior Court of the District of Columbia

John Hill
Chair of the Board of Directors
DC Children and Youth Investment Trust
Corporation

Roscoe C. Howard, Jr.
U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia

Cynthia E. Jones
Director
Public Defender Service

Eugene Kinlow
Board Member
DC Financial Responsibility and Management
Assistance Authority

Joshua Lopez
Maya Angelou Public Charter School

Charles A. Miller
Partner
Covington & Burling

Richard Monteilh
President
DC Chamber of Commerce

Sharon Styles-Anderson
Senior Deputy Corporation Counsel for Public
Protection and Enforcement
Office of the Corporation Counsel, Government of
the District of Columbia

Reverend Karen Taylor
Vice President
National Capital Baptist Convention Youth
Division

Carrie Thornhill
Vice President, Youth Investment and Community
Outreach
DC Agenda

**Blue Ribbon Commission on
Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform
in the District of Columbia**

Anthony A. Williams, Mayor

Commission Members

Linda Bowen Executive Director National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention	Eugene Kinlow Board Member DC Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority
Walter Broadnax, Ph.D. Dean, School of Public Affairs American University	Wilma A. Lewis* Former U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia
Timothy C. Coughlin President Riggs National Corporation	Robert Linowes** Senior Partner Linowes & Blocher
Father Russell L. Dillard Saint Augustine Church	Joshua Lopez Maya Angelou Public Charter School
Alex Escarcega Juvenile Service Administrator Department of Justice	Charles A. Miller Partner Covington & Burling
Terri Lee Freeman President Community Foundation for the National Capital Region	Richard Monteilh President DC Chamber of Commerce
The Honorable Eugene N. Hamilton, Chair Senior Judge Superior Court of the District of Columbia	Charles Ruff*** Attorney at Law Covington and Burling
John Hill Jr. Chair of the Board of Directors DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation	Sharon Styles-Anderson Senior Deputy Corporation Counsel for Public Protection and Enforcement Office of the Corporation Counsel, Government of the District of Columbia
Roscoe C. Howard, Jr. U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia	Reverend Karen Taylor Vice President National Capital Baptist Convention Youth Division
Cynthia E. Jones Director Public Defender Service	Carrie Thornhill Vice President, Youth Investment and Community Outreach DC Agenda

Commission Staff

Ali Basir Director of Operations Special Assistant, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth and Families	Lola Odubekun, Ph.D. Senior Consultant
Julie Farber Senior Policy Analyst, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth and Families	Jeanne Oh Senior Research Associate
Gerard Ferguson, Ph.D. Research Director	Connie Spinner Facilitator Director, State Education Office

* Served from July 2000 to April 2001

** Served from July 2000 to March 2001

*** Deceased

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Acknowledgments

The Commission on behalf of Mayor Anthony A. Williams, the youth and citizens of the District of Columbia, recognizes and thanks Gerard Ferguson, Ph. D., Director of Research, Lola Odubekun, Ph. D., Senior Consultant, Julie Farber, Senior Policy Analyst in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, and Families, Ali Basir, Director of Operations and Special Assistant to the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, and Families, Jeanne Oh, Senior Research Associate, and Connie Spinner, Commission Facilitator, for their outstanding work in assisting the Commission in conducting its work and producing the Commission's Report. Without the dedication and outstanding work of Drs. Ferguson and Odubekun, Ms. Farber, Mr. Basir, Ms. Spinner, and Ms. Oh, the Commission would not have been able to perform its mission. The Commission expresses its profound thanks to Dr. Ferguson, Dr. Odubekun, Ms. Farber, Mr. Basir, Ms Oh, and Ms. Spinner.

Without a doubt, the support of Bart Lubow and the Annie E. Casey Foundation has enabled the Commission to conduct its research and related activities with generous financial and technical assistance. The Fannie Mae Foundation has also afforded the wonderful opportunity to conduct high quality research, outreach, and production of this project. The Commission is forever grateful!

A very warm and special thanks to supportive colleagues who helped us to keep it all together and to get “camera ready” without fail -ever: first and foremost, Adra Alston,

Katrina Green, Quentin Hines, and Kim Williams in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, and Families; Karen Stephenson, Superior Court of the District of Columbia; Leteef Mangum, EOM Communications; Debra Davis, EOM Support Services.

Commission members and staff would like to thank the following individuals who lent an inordinate amount of their time, resources, expertise, and energy to the data analysis and information-gathering process: Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, and Families, Carolyn N. Graham; Calvin C. Johnson, Ph.D., David Huffer, and Andrew Timleck, who provided outstanding research and analysis support from the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice; Sarah Stilwill, Rukya Eaddy, and Diarmuid Houston; Office of the Corporation Counsel, for their outstanding legal research assistance; Leigh Toney in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, and Families; Wanda Alston, Doris Howard, Mark Jordan, and Torrey Lee in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice; Jacqueline Flowers and Bill Jenkins, Office of Local Business Development, for use of their space and resources; Gayle Turner, Valerie Boykin, and Laura Caldwell, Youth Services Administration; Moses McAllister, Court Social Services, Superior Court of the District of Columbia; Stephanie Harrison, Public Defender Service; Vincent Schiraldi and Tim Roche, Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice; Inspector Robin Hoey, Nola Joyce, Chief Rodney Monroe, and Inspector Lillian Overton, and Chief Shannon Cockett, Metropolitan Police Department; John De Taeye, Weed and Seed Collaborative; Joseph Tulman, University of the District of Columbia and Chair, Juvenile Justice Advisory Group; Neil Albert and Kennedy

Khabo, Department of Parks and Recreation; Martha Knisley and Elizabeth Taylor, Department of Mental Health; Wendy Salaam, Department of Health; Dr. Andrea Weisman, Department of Human Services; Henning Vent, Office of the Corporation Counsel; Emily Watson, Department of Corrections; Emerson Harris, Consortium for Youth Services; Timothy P. Harrison, Ph.D., Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; Mark Soler, Liz Ryan, and Marc Schindler of the Georgetown University Youth Law Center; and, members of the Justice for DC Youth! Coalition; and, Arna Lane and Paul Scott, who worked diligently on the report presentation and production.

A very special thanks as well to colleagues in other jurisdictions who hosted, shared, and compared best practices with Commission members and staff during site visits: Steve Robinson, Linda Reyes, Ph.D., Dwight Harris, Neal Nichols, Tom Tye, Alan Steen, Chester Clay, John ‘Butch’ Held, and Jerome Parese with the Texas Youth Commission; Cary Cockrell, Jerry M. Wood, Judge Jean Hudson Boyd of the 323 District Court, Charles Vermersch, Peggy Tucker, Bob Woods, and Ken Harris, with Tarrant County Juvenile Detention Center; In Missouri, Mark Steward, Patrick Doyen, Kevin Richards, April Estill, Vicki Weimholt, and Kurt Bumby of the Missouri Division of Youth Services. Judge Kehm of the 23rd Judicial Circuit, Lewis Mueller, and Judge S. Limbaugh of the Missouri State Supreme Court; In Boston, Ken Roberson, Reverend Eugene Rivers, Andre Norman, Eva Thorne, and other colleagues at the Ella Baker House, along with Superintendent Paul Joyce and colleagues with the Boston Police Department; In New York City, Brant Lyon of Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth; Herb Manley, Paul Schiller, Jean Knight, and Monica Gomez of the Children’s

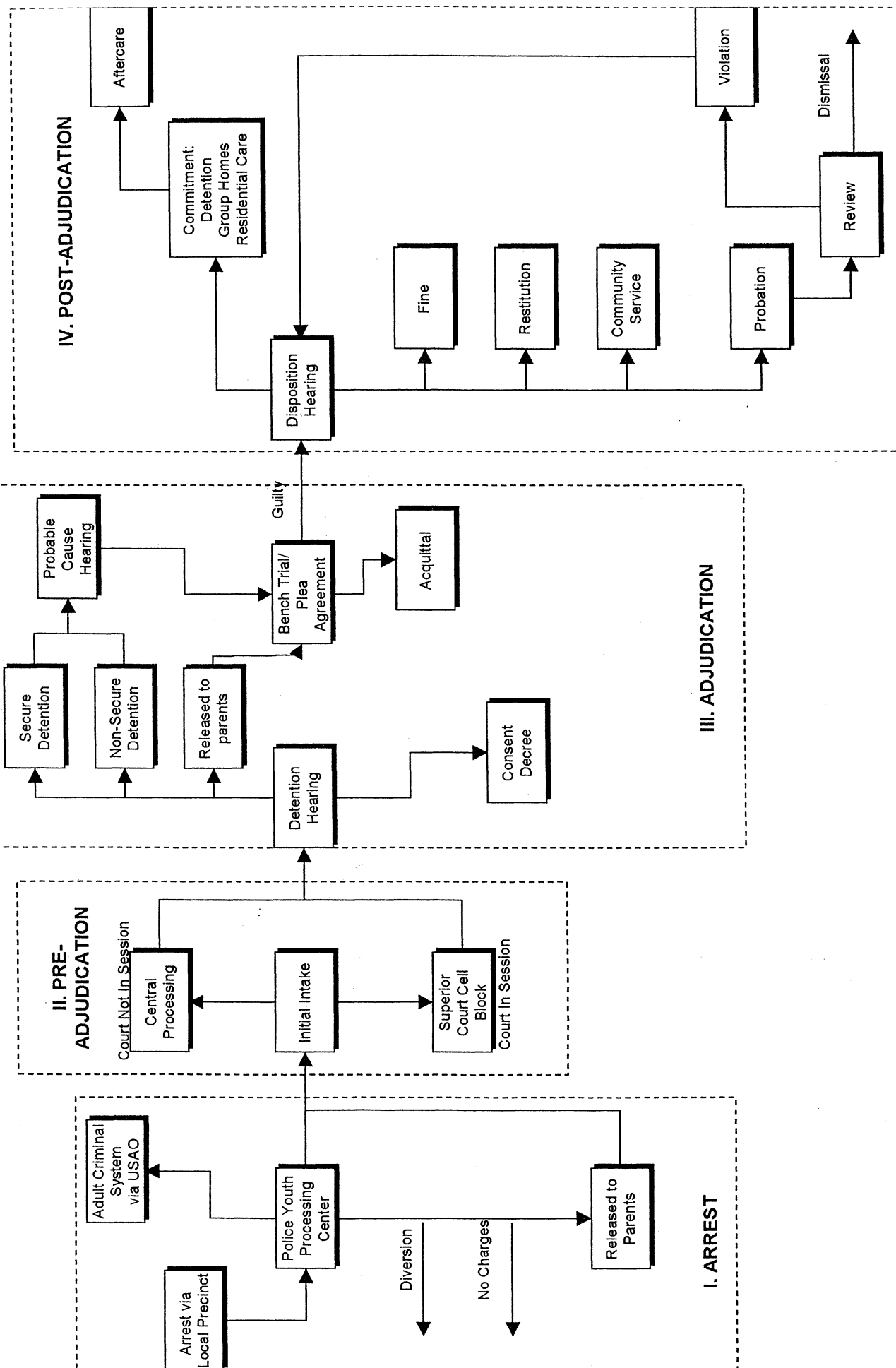
Village; Staff of the Neighborhood Defender Service, Harlem, New York; Sherese Brewington-Carr, Delaware, Director Youth Rehabilitative Services Division, Department for Children, Youth and their Families, and Nancy Pearsal, Assistant Director; In Hampton, Chief Thomas Townsend, Hampton Police Department, Michael Canty, Director, In-Sync Partnership, Keith Rotzoll, Recreation Manager, Hampton Department of Parks and Recreation, Turner Spencer, City of Hampton Councilmember, Rhet Tignor, City of Hampton Councilmember, Cindy Carlson, Executive Director, Coalition for Youth, Kathy Johnson, Executive Director, Alternatives, Inc., Ally Graul, Youth Development Center, Alternatives, Inc., Terry O'Neill, Director, Hampton Department of Planning, Kathy Werner, Assistant Clerk of the Council, Office of the City Council, City of Hampton, and Mamie E. Locke, Ph.D., Mayor, City of Hampton.

Introduction

The District of Columbia Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform (hereafter referred to as “the Commission”) was established by Mayor Anthony Williams on August 18, 2000, through Mayoral Order No. 2000-130 (See Appendix F). Commission members were charged with the responsibility to offer policy recommendations to address youth safety and the juvenile justice system. Major themes in the Commission’s charge included: an assessment of youth crime prevention strategies and model programs; the identification of strengths and weaknesses in rehabilitative and supportive services and programs; an exploration of research related to the impact of youth violence and substance abuse among youth; an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of current institutional systems; and the development of strategies for serving children and youth in their communities and neighborhoods. In addition, Mayor Williams issued an explicit call for a vision and seamless network of youth service ideals that “treat children as children.”

In addition to placing a premium on the design of a juvenile justice system which simultaneously treats children as children and guards public safety, Mayor Williams expressed a desire to identify best practices that could be integrated into the District of Columbia. This process was anchored by the interdisciplinary, interagency, and multi-sector background of the individuals who have served an important public service duty through their participation on this Commission (See Appendix A). Recognizing the need for collaborative research, policy, and program frameworks to address youth safety,

Figure 1
JUVENILE PROCESSING IN THE DISTRICT'S CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM



Commission members from a range of professional backgrounds in the public and private sector were also united by their affirmation of the complexity of individual, family, community, and environmental factors that put children and youth at risk for crime and violence.

In order to achieve the mandate identified in *Mayoral Order No. 2000-130*, the Commission adopted the following objectives and strategies, so that it could solicit the most comprehensive input from a range of stakeholders:

- **Map juvenile crime and the structure of the juvenile justice system in the District of Columbia.** The Commission analyzed comprehensive reports, as well as primary and secondary data related to trends in juvenile crime. This included an exploration of information related to current institutional structures and services designed to address youth development in community-based contexts and schools, programming in the juvenile justice system, and legislative and administrative oversight of the juvenile justice system (See Figure 1). Information and data were gathered through formal research, workshops and conversations with policy experts and juvenile justice advocates and coalitions, and discussions and interviews with program directors and public officials. Public and community hearings and testimony also supplied important information about exposure of youth to risks for crime and violence and other contextual information needed to evaluate the effectiveness of current youth services (See Appendix C).

- **Identification of Best Practices and Model Programs.** Commission members engaged in discussions of identified best practices and model programs in the District of Columbia and other jurisdictions (See Appendix D). In addition to visits to youth programs across the District of Columbia, Commissioners conducted 7 (seven) site visits to other jurisdictions between May and August 2001. Best practices were also identified through input from an interactive Commission website, informal discussions with youth and youth advocates, juvenile justice scholars, and additional technical assistance from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Urban Institute, Georgetown University/Youth Law Center, New York University/Center for Child and Family Policy, Center on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, and the federal Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention, among other government, university, and community-based resources.
- **Identification of Strengths and Unmet Needs in Service Delivery.** Commission members asked questions about the scope and quality of existing youth services in order to identify strengths and gaps in programming. This process involved discussions with youth (including some whose lives were impacted by interactions with the juvenile justice system) and youth providers, community organizations and neighborhood groups, program directors working on child welfare in the public and private sectors, and colleagues from

neighboring jurisdictions (See Appendix E). The Commission also held two public hearings (March 31, 2001 and April 5, 2001) to gather information from the public at large.

Based on the benchmarks presented in the fifteen-year-old *Jerry M.* consent decree (See Appendix F) and themes uncovered from these hearings about the quality of youth programming and police/youth relations, the Commission decided to organize focus groups so that youth and youth providers could speak more personally and privately about their personal and professional experiences. Members of the faith community were also invited to participate in a roundtable to share their perceptions of youth needs and service delivery.

- **Development of Policy Recommendations and Final Report.** After identifying core areas of the continuum for youth development and programming in the juvenile justice system, Commission members organized themselves into subcommittees designed to research and recommend various policy alternatives. In addition to an *Executive Committee*, which coordinated cross-cutting themes, other subcommittees included: *Youth Development* (explored community-based strategies designed to create a seamless network of services for youth); *Programming* (examined existing and model programming in juvenile justice system); *Legislative* (analyzed legislative and administrative authority related to implementation of various strategies to deal with youth services and juvenile delinquency). A *Governance* subcommittee was subsequently formed to present a report in the context of a discussion of the challenges of the implementation

process and the feasibility of cultural and institutional change. Input for this process was gathered from advocates and colleagues in the District of Columbia and other jurisdictions, as well as through historical analysis of the juvenile justice system in the District of Columbia.

I cannot possibly present this report without mention of the fact that the Commission's work was deeply enriched by the dedication of many individuals. First, I must thank the Subcommittee Chairs- Governance (Charles Miller), Legislative (Sharon Styles-Anderson), Programming (Alex Escarcega), and Youth Development (Terri Lee Freeman)- who guided the Commission's work in many important ways. Second, we must acknowledge two individuals who endeavored to improve the lives of children and youth in the District of Columbia. Unfortunately, one of them, the late Charles F.C. Ruff, former Corporation Counsel for the District of Columbia, passed away last November. His resolve to improve the lives of children and youth- both inside and outside the juvenile justice system- lived on along with the voices of other Commissioners who shared his passion. The other individual is Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, and Families, Carolyn Graham, who, in addition to her own personal energy, provided the Commission with the professional guidance of her entire staff in order to carry out the Mayor's Order.

Finally, I must acknowledge the generosity of our two major funders for the Commission's work- the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Fannie Mae Foundation. Without their support for the research, technical assistance, and outreach processes that supported this report, none of the Commission's work would have been possible.

There is an old African American spiritual which speaks to the sanctity of life and the yearning to reach one's potential: "I got a right. I got a right. Lord, I got a right to the tree of life." I am reminded of these powerful words, as I end my tenure as Chair of this Commission. Nothing is more important than the expectation that our children and youth have access to the nurturance afforded by our city's "tree of life." The right to reach their full potential with family and community support. This report represents an effort to promote a more productive dialogue among all of us- youth, public officials, advocates, judges, probation workers, police, social workers and child welfare activists- about how we are meeting the challenge to ensure that children in the District of Columbia have the necessary support to live productive and safe lives into the twenty-first century.

Eugene N. Hamilton, Senior Judge, Superior Court of the District of Columbia and
Chair, Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform